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Multispecies Disobedience. Vegetables-activists relation in Italian social movements

Abstract

Over the last few years, the fight against global warming has been embraced by several social movements worldwide. This chapter argues that an alliance between the anthropology of social movement and multispecies ethnography is helpful to better understand the relation between activism and the nonhuman entities for which it advocates. I focus on a case study in Padua (Italy), where I've been personally involved as an activist and as a researcher in an occupied space called *La Tana*. Experimenting with auto-ethnography and multispecies ethnography, my case examines the so-called 'recupera,' which consists of recovering a sizable number of vegetables considered unsaleable by the food trade system, fresh food that is redistributed for free in different neighbourhoods. Even if the main ideology that justifies this practice is its sustainability, I argue that there is a more complex, more-than-human relationship between activists and vegetables. I will interpret this entanglement relying on different posthuman theories, in particular on the concept of companion species (Haraway 2016).

Keywords: More-than-human resistance, Multispecies, Companion species, Activism

> *Remember that so late as the mid-twentieth century, most scientists, and many artists, did not believe that even Dolphin would ever be comprehensible to the human brain—or worth comprehending! Let another century pass, and we may seem equally laughable. 'Do you realise,' the phytolinguist will say to the aesthetic critic, 'that they couldn't even read Eggplant?' And they will smile at our ignorance, as they pick up their rucksacks and hike on up to read the newly deciphered lyrics of the lichen on the north face of Pike's Peak.*
>
> (Le Guin, 1982: 15)

Introduction

Climate change may be considered one of the most urgent challenges that humanity has to face. Global warming, biodiversity loss, the increase of extreme events, and environmental pollution are just some of the issues around which contemporary social movements mobilise. The fight for the planet has been embraced by several forms

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of environmental activism, reshaping already existing movements, and establishing new ones, like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Last Generation. In order to grasp the fluid complexity of collective resistance, the study of social movements has been embracing new perspectives, engaging with new methodological and theoretical tools, and advancing new concepts (for an excellent overview, see Kuřík 2016).

One of the most interesting sources of inspiration comes from the rich multi-disciplinary arena of posthumanism, in particular the so-called multispecies ethnography. What makes this field itself quite revolutionary is the fact that '[c]reatures previously appearing on the margins of anthropology – as part of the landscape, as food for humans, as symbols – have been pressed into the foreground' (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010: 545). Applying the posthuman paradigm to the study of social movements, new questions arise. What if the nonhuman beings in whose name social movements are fighting (endangered animal and plant species, cattle, lab animals, but also rivers, forests, oceans), were able to actively contribute to the struggle? What happens if we interpret new forms of activism through the multispecies paradigm? How can the more-than-human field help to better understand the relation between activists and the nonhuman beings they stand up for? In order to address these questions, I reflect on a particular case study in which I was personally involved, not only as a researcher but also as an activist. This place is *La Tana* which means 'the den', a little occupied space in Padua, in the northeast of Italy, managed by a civil disobedience collective. At *La Tana*, the fight against climate change takes the shape of a particular practice. This consists of recovering a sizable number of vegetables considered unsaleable by the food trade system, fresh food which is then redistributed for free in the neighbourhood, setting up a peculiar relationship between activists and vegetables.

The paper starts with a short overview of the theoretical underpinning of this study. In the first section, I elaborate upon current issues addressed both by anthropology of social movements and by multispecies ethnography, suggesting that an alliance between the two fields could help overcome each other's limits. The second section outlines the ethnographic data collected during two different time frames. In the third part, I interpret these data through the multispecies debate; in particular, I rely on the concept of 'companion species' (Haraway 2003,

2008, 2016) to read the relationship between activists and vegetables. In order to do that, I try to assume the perspectives of the two subjects that emerge from this relation, suggesting that activists are 'made capable' thanks to the vegetables and vice versa. I do not claim that this interpretation could be automatically extended to all forms of environmentalism. Rather, I echo Bob Kuřík when he writes that 'more-than-human resistance is situational, contextual, and thus empirically traceable—it is always of a particular time, place, life world, and of particular spatial and temporal constellations of humans and non-humans.' (2022: 64). Neither do I aspire to be neutral or objective. This knowledge has been co-produced in a politically dense and passionately sided way, and doesn't want to be defused. In David Graeber's words:

> What makes this an ethnographic work in the classic sense of the term is that, as Franz Boas once put it, the general is in the service of the particular […]. Theory is invoked largely to aid in the ultimate task of description. Anarchists and direct action campaigns do not exist to allow some academic to make a theoretical point or prove some rival's theory wrong [...], and it strikes me as obnoxious to suggest otherwise (2009: VIII).

1. An anthropology of multispecies resistance

Generally speaking, social movements can be understood as nets of informal relations based on shared beliefs and on strategic collective actions oriented to the transformation of a society's institutional aspects (Koensler & Rossi 2012). Political anthropology has been giving its contribution to the study of 'new social movements'[1] thanks to the emergence of a new research field rooted in the relation between social actors' agency and socio-political structures (Koensler 2012). According to Stefano Boni (2012), one of the new features of contemporary social movements is their ability to uncover the dramatic limits of democratic institutions. In this context, I understand social movements as forms of social aggregation capable of creating activist sub-

1 'New social movement theories' (Habermas 2008; Mellucci 1996; Touraine 1998) emerge from the crisis of modernity and from the overcoming of the old class conflict. The focus is on the construction of collective forms of membership and self-determination through symbolic and cultural resources. New social movement theories constitute an answer to the inadequacy of the classic Marxist theories and of the 'resource mobilization theory' (McAdam, Zald, and McCarthy 1996).

jectivities that collectively implement practices aimed at breaking with the existing instead of perpetuating it. As Bob Kuřík (2016) articulates in his overview, the concept of resistant subjectivity has been analysed ever since the 1970s and 1980s. After a decade of harsh critiques in the 1990s, we witness a proliferation of work on anti-globalisation/anti-neoliberalism movements at the beginning of the century, 'still breathing until today, and further conceptualized with new terms like urban protest, horizontal democracy, occupation, alter-globalization, anti-austerity mobilization, hacktivism, Arab spring or militant ethnography' (Kuřík 2016: 51).

Meanwhile, a growing body of multispecies research addresses the question of agency from a quite different perspective. Following Laura Ogden and her colleagues in their review, I would define multispecies ethnography as:

> [an] ethnographic research and writing that is attuned to life's emergence within a shifting assemblage of agentive beings. […] [M]ultispecies ethnography is a project that seeks to understand the world as materially real, partially knowable, multicultured and multinatured, magical, and emergent through the contingent relations of multiple beings and entities. Accordingly, the nonhuman world of multispecies encounters has its own logic and rules of engagement that exist within the larger articulations of the human world, encompassing the flow of nutrients and matter, the liveliness of animals, plants, bacteria, and other beings. (Ogden et al. 2013: 6)

Therefore, anthropological observation participates in the dynamic assemblages of plants, animals, fungi, geological, and landscape entities in an attempt to find new forms of liveability on a ruined planet (e.g., Tsing 2014, 2015; Khon 2021). Ethnographers embark on a series of field studies that extend the characters that used to define human uniqueness, recognizing the emergence of other forms of agency, sociality, speech, and thought. 'Some of the most important work in this field takes aim at human exceptionalism by proposing a posthumanist anthropology. Proponents pursue multispecies ethnography, which gives equal standing in our studies to the perspectives of nonhuman life-forms and even nonlife forms' (Orr et al. 2015: 161).

If posthuman research has been deconstructing human uniqueness, extending traditionally human abilities to the more-than-human world, social movements scholars are just starting to apply this approach to their field. Kuřík writes about engaging with the concept

of 'more-than-human resistanc,' grasping the potential of opening the concept of resistance in political anthropology 'to include the agency of nonhumans and their capacity to make social and political changes, fight back, co-produce rebelliously charged effects, meanings and interpretations, deny being controlled or dominated, affect more-than-human others in a political way' (Kuřík 2022: 58).

The aim of this chapter is precisely to explore the possibility of an alliance between the field of multispecies studies and the anthropology of social movements. In fact, on the one hand, multispecies ethnography is accused of being disengaged and depoliticized:

> Unless multispecies ethnography is willing to engage with such questions, it is likely to remain apolitical, without realizing the exploitative nature of human-nonhuman relationship[s]. […] The lack of moral commitment is exemplary of how multispecies anthropology deals – or rather refuses to deal with – nonhuman suffering. (Kopnina 2017: 342)

On the other hand, contemporary studies on social movements can't avoid recognizing nonhuman agency and subjectivity:

> [T]he anthropology of resistance is confronted, I argue, with the task of re-calibrating its optics [...] towards recognition of the agentic capacity of non-humans, as well as towards the art of noticing more-than-human resistance […] Such a move to narrow down could offer the anthropology of resistance a closer and more systematic look at more-than-human forms of protest in which people are not only *fighting for* food, nature, or *fighting against* resource extractions, but *fighting together* with various biological allies in struggles where resisting agency is recognized and redistributed along multispecies lines. (Kuřík 2022: 62, 67).

Kuřík gives several examples of more-than-human protests, such as unsuccessful plantations' attempts (Scott 2012), cows' behaviour in a factory farm (Žeková 2013), troubles at genetically engineered soy monocultures (Beilin and Suryanarayanan 2017). Even if they are traditionally portrayed exclusively as failures of human capitalistic endeavours, we could also recognize a form of nonhuman refusal, with which human social movements can coordinate. In my contribution, I consider discarded vegetables as disobedient, as they don't meet the market's aesthetic expectations, and are therefore considered unprofitable; this physical resistance to the norm is strategically used by human climate movements, as I will articulate.

My research is based mainly on three different methodologies. The first one is multispecies auto-ethnography (Gillespie 2021), as I've interrogated my personal experience as a climate activist, with a particular attention to the self in relation to nonhuman others. In fact, I've been personally involved in the management of *La Tana* for approximately three years, between 2018 and 2020. This previous first-person participation has allowed me to rely on my memories and embodied experience, as well as on the analysis of political brochures and pamphlets we have written collectively during that period. I've been using deep self-reflection to interrogate my memories (Adams et al. 2017); this academic use of reflexivity also helped to position myself in the field, making my presence as an anthropologist and as an activist coexist. These auto-ethnographic data have been enriched with interviews and informal dialogues assembled during six months of fieldwork, from January to June 2022. During this period, I was involved in *La Tana* with the aim of better understanding the relationship between activists and recovered vegetables. The two rounds of collected data have been reviewed and analysed through the multispecies theory. Finally, in the last part, I have turned methodologically to 'speculative fabulation' writing (Haraway 2016). As Sarah Truman explains, in Haraway's theory speculative fabulation is a scholarly practice rooted in everyday storytelling, a practice that 'defamiliarizes, queers perception, and disrupts habitual ways of knowing' (2018: 31). According to Grebowicz and Merrick, theory-making that results from imaginative re-thinking of the world positions speculative fabulation 'as both methodological tool and a source of creative inspiration' (2013: 112). In this specific case, I use speculative fabulation as a philosophical inquiry made possible through narrative, empirical, and ethnographic narration.

2. *Recovered vegetables at* La Tana

La Tana is a small squat, an occupied social centre, located on the ground floor of a building in a popular university neighbourhood in Padua. It is surrounded by social housing, mainly inhabited by old people. It consists of two rooms of about forty square metres each, two small bathrooms, and a kitchen. There is a narrow inner backyard, shared with the rest of the building. *La Tana* is embedded in a broad network of informal left-wing political realities; the space has been oc-

cupied for at least fifteen years and has hosted many different activities, gathering a good number of people from very different backgrounds. During fieldwork, people referred to *La Tana* as a 'social laboratory' with a self-managed study room, handcraft activities, a queer transfeminist collective, and the distribution of recovered vegetables.

According to Stine Krøijer (2019) at the beginning of the century, after a decade of spectacular protests in contrast to global summits, we are witnessing the emergence of a form of militancy that prefers the construction of local autonomies and alternative spaces to the capitalist system in villages, neighbourhoods, and social centres. *La Tana* offers a good example of this tendency, as it expresses rejection of the capitalistic norm in a more silent way, compared to direct actions or huge demonstrations. Political ideals are, in fact, performed in collective everyday practices. One of these is the so-called 'recupera' or rescuing food. It has been going on for almost ten years. It started with dumpster diving (Barnard 2011) in the neighbourhood and then, through a series of contacts, came to recover food at MAAP, the Padua Agro-Food Market. This is a huge wholesale market where 32 fruit and vegetable wholesalers operate; they employ about a thousand people, in addition to numerous undeclared workers. Recovering vegetables requires going to the MAAP just before closing time, early in the morning, and going through the different stands to ask if there is any redundancy, they are willing to give away. This consists of surplus production or vegetables discarded because they're deemed as not meeting aesthetic specifications. This practice moves into the interstices left empty in the distribution chain: there is nothing in writing, and the unsold should officially either be thrown away or donated to soup kitchens. For years, the activity has been carried out weekly thanks to *La Tana* and other informal groups (like *Cucina Brigante* or *Food not Bombs*), until it became routine even for the market's workers. The recovered food is then distributed in the neighbourhood, with a couple of tables outside the entrance and 'serving' the customers, who may eventually leave a small donation. Those who rely on this service are mainly elderly women, migrant women, and university students; the activity attracts mostly low-income residents.

Dusting off old fliers, article drafts, Facebook posts and of course my memories, I'll try to summarise the ideals that activists have been relying on in order to justify this practice. The *recupera* is presented as one of the possible forms of fighting climate change, a practice that

restores potential to what capital imposes as waste. Statistics estimate that food waste, if it were a country, would take third place among the largest emitters of CO_2, after China and the US (FAO 2013: 17). Combating waste and recovering discarded food is a practice of countering a mechanism that is leading to ecosystem collapse. Large multinational corporations are identified as enemies. In various fliers and posts on Facebook, the need for a sharp rejection and a radical transition of our production system to a sustainable model are advocated for.[2] Rescuing is also presented as a form of redistribution of wealth, re-appropriation of income, the starting point for the collectivization of the means of production. The ultimate goal is clear: 'the reproduction of life outside the currently dominant system, based on the natural right to live by escaping the oppression of the market mechanism' (article draft, 2018).

Even though a lot happened between my presence at *La Tana* as an activist and the fieldwork[3], the *recupera* was still going on. Attempting to concretize the ideal of not re-entering capitalist industrial production is not so simple, though. For example, this practice doesn't always succeed in the intent to create public awareness on the impact of industrial agriculture on CO_2 emissions. The *recupera* is, in fact, interpreted by many as a form of assistance to the poor. L., the activist who was responsible for this activity, was quite sceptical about this problem. She once shared some thoughts regarding a conversation she had with an employee of the market. Even if there's no written agreement between the MAAP and the people of *La Tana*, this person valued the activists' practice, and informally assumed the responsibility of taking care of L. and the other people coming to his stand asking for food redundancy. He has been also actively storing some vegetables that were supposed to be thrown away, in order to save them for the activists. L. told me:

> I also had a few chats with a storekeeper who is sort of in charge of the *recupera*, let's say. He has a somewhat church-like approach, like "it's providence that gives us these things, we shouldn't waste them". He also acts a bit moralistic: "I save the excess for you, who are so good at distributing

2 LSO La Tana. 2019. *Lo Spreco Alimentare*; LSO La Tana. 2019. *Recupera Gourmet*.

3 I don't have space to elaborate here on the changes that have been taking place. I would like to specify, however, that during my fieldwork, the issue of climate change was just one of the several other political struggles that *La Tana* was carrying on, along with LGBTQIA+ political fights, legal support for migrants, and the promotion of students' sociality.

> to the poor. However, there are other employees who take it even though they know these vegetables go to those in need." (interview, May 2022)

According to L., the charitable attitude of both the stakeholders and the external sympathisers contrasts with the intentions that gave rise to the practice of the *recupera*. In the activists' narration, it is an anticapitalistic praxis that wants to distance itself from industrial food production and to highlight the urgency of climate change. Apparently though, this message doesn't reach the people that support or rely on it, who often interpret the *recupera* as a paternalistic 'feeding the poor' group. Even if saving food and income, or class issues are closely intertwined, not being associated with charity or Christian organisations was particularly important to this deeply atheist collective. To change this perception, a series of 'NoWaste' aperitifs were organised along the themes of combating waste and of taking care of both the environment and the community.

Recovering has quickly become a widespread practice across other left-wing social movements, and, according to some employers of the MAAP, waste rates have actually decreased. Even if the initial aim was environmentalist sabotage, it's becoming increasingly clear how it comes in handy for MAAP farmers to give away boxes of unsaleable foodstuffs because it decreases their disposal expenses. City institutions as well have noticed this activity, and they are trying to empower it. For example, during my fieldwork, the municipality sent out a questionnaire to some associations and informal realities in order to figure out how to support this valuable anti-waste habit. The anti-capitalist soul of *La Tana* risks being subsumed by the institutions (like the market and the state) against which the squat was born. Nonetheless, I think that there is a kind of feral dynamic that exceeds what the postmodern order tries to tame. This emerged clearly during my fieldwork, focusing the analysis on the concrete vegetable-activists encounter.

According to Anna Tsing, patterns of unintentional coordination develop in multispecies assemblages. '[I]f we want to know what makes places livable, we should be studying polyphonic assemblages, gatherings of ways of being. Assemblages are performances of livability.' (2015: 157). Assemblages are divergent lifeways that gather in an interplay of temporal rhythms and scales; their elements are contaminated and unstable. Recovering vegetables is a practice that can create

multispecies assemblages within the urban landscape. The network of more-than-human sociality created by vegetables grown, harvested, sold, moved, manipulated, discarded, recovered, and distributed allows for the formation of unexpected collaborations. Recovered vegetables are social entities capable of founding unprecedented alliances and relationships between the activists and the neighbourhood. In particular, I suggest that the kind of relation that connects the activists and the vegetables is one of 'becoming-with', rendering activists and vegetables 'companion species' (Haraway 2016).

3. Activists and vegetables as companion species

The concept of companion species is inextricably tied to Donna Haraway, who has been working in particular on human-dog cohabitation, coevolution, and embodied cross-species sociality. In *Companion Species Manifesto*, she states that 'The world is a knot in motion. [...] There are no pre-constituted subjects and objects, and no single sources, unitary actors, or final ends. In Judith Butler's terms, there are only "contingent foundations;" bodies that matter are the result.' (2003: 6). Partners come to be who they are through significant otherness, subjects of the world are constituted in intra- and inter-actions, making each other up. Some years later, in *When Species Meet* (2008), the philosopher offers a taste of the promiscuous net of meanings of which the two terms 'companion' and 'species' are charged. I will just report here a short glimpse:

> *Companion* comes from the Latin *cum panis,* "with bread." Messmates at table are companions. Comrades are political companions. […] The Latin *specere* is at the root of things here, with its tones of "to look" and "to behold." […] Species is about the dance linking kin and kind. The ability to interbreed reproductively is the rough and ready requirement for members of the same biological species. (2008: 17)

But it's in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) that Haraway articulates the idea of companion species in a way that seems particularly adapted for interpreting the activists-vegetable relation at *La Tana*. According to Haraway, companion species render capable each other in a becoming-with game:

> Becoming-with, not becoming, is the name of the game; becoming-with is how partners are, in Vinciane Despret's terms, rendered capable. […] Ontologically heterogeneous partners become who and what they are in relational material-semiotic worlding […] Companion species play string figure games […]. The partners do not precede the knotting; species of all kinds are consequent upon worldly subject- and object-shaping entanglements. (2016: 12–13)

Heterogeneous partners such as vegetables and people emerge as subjects thanks to their encounter. People don't become activists alone, but through the relation with discarded vegetables. Similarly, vegetables become witnesses of food waste related climate change, through the relation with activists. They become who they are becoming-with each other. Thanks to this multispecies assemblage they emerge as political subjects, they render each other capable of situated social and ecological practices, namely of finding their way of existence in a world based on multispecies inequalities and climate change. The activists-vegetables encounter sets in motion an unexpected process of liveability. The material connection, the concrete bodily relationship of human activists moving and manipulating discarded vegetables, changes both human and nonhuman beings involved in this material-semiotic becoming-with. They encourage the development of particular abilities, or 'response-abilites' (ibid.). Haraway narrates the story of the relationship between humans and pigeons, who share a long history of becoming-with. One of the examples she brings up is the PigeonWatch project (Washington, DC), which enlists city kids from minority groups to observe and record urban pigeons. Black kids and pigeons share the racist prejudice of being dirty, unruly, and feral. The kids change from being bird abusers to acute observers and advocates of creatures they had never respected. 'Perhaps, because pigeons have long histories of affective and cognitive relations with people, the pigeons looked back at the kids too' (ibid.: 24). In the case of the encounter between activists and vegetables, I believe that they make each other capable of finding a way to deal with the perils of the precarity of their existence. As I will articulate in the next paragraphs, on the one hand, vegetables offer to the activists means through which to fight for their ideals; on the other, activists make emerge a form of vegetable communication.

Humans and nonhumans train each other in acts of communication, they make each other accountable for, care for, and be affected

by each other. Vinciane Despret, quoted by Haraway, reflects on the work of Pepperberg, a psychologist who succeeded in making the parrot Alex speak and be understood. This is another story of becoming-with, making each other capable:

> Here then is not what parrots are but what they might be rendered capable of. This rendering capable at the same time indicates what is at work here: Alex talks because Pepperberg desires it and demands it of him, and because she was able to subordinate her desire to what makes sense for Alex in the matter of speaking. She was able to negotiate with Alex over what in speech could interest him. Alex talks because for diverse reasons his desire overlaps with that of Pepperberg. (2008: 127)

Surely, recovered vegetables will not show desires like a parrot could. Nonetheless, I argue that activists make vegetables capable of communicating as political subjects. The philosopher Sally Scholz (2013) coined the term 'solidarity on behalf.' If political solidarity is a 'moral relation that unites individuals acting on the basis of some form of commitment to challenge injustice' (ibid.: 82), she wonders if it is possible for humans to be unified in political solidarity with 'earth others,' nonhuman entities. It would require that the other-than-human subjects with whom humans fight make a similar commitment to collective action. Vegetables, in this case, should see or understand their actions in relation to others and as part of the collective movement. Scholz doesn't think this is possible. Nevertheless, she suggests the alternative idea of 'solidarity on behalf of the more-than-human world.' When humans act in solidarity on behalf of (instead of with) earth others, they take the floor for those who cannot speak for themselves in the political arena without assuming social and epistemological privilege on the part of humans. I partially disagree; sticking to the case of vegetables at *La Tana,* I don't see vegetables as silent subjects. Even if they clearly can't speak like humans, I argue that their relationship with activists makes them capable of a specific kind of means of expression. The activist renders the vegetable capable of representing social change, 'asking' people on the market to look at them differently, and caring for them differently due to *recupera* activism. And this only works since in light of an endangered planet, vegetables 'ask' people to reflect on systemic exploitation of nonhumans. I will now assume the perspectives of the two different poles of the relationship,

the humans and the vegetables, in order to investigate the implication of 'making capable' in the context of political activism.

3.1. Activists in a precarious world

First, how do vegetables make activists capable of doing what?

Being young in the era of climate change is not easy. According to Tsing, younger generations in particular find themselves inhabiting a present in which dreams of modernization and progress dissolve into 'a life without the promise of stability' (2015: 2). The twenty-first century has left us without a useful compass to make our way in an increasingly indeterminate future, in which the possibility of a habitable planet declines exponentially. Finding a form of liveability in the ruins of development is an 'imaginative challenge' (ibid.), one that can be addressed through the multispecies co-creation of niches of ecological disobedience.

S. was one of the reference points of *La Tana* during my fieldwork. He is a peaceful person in his late twenties, recently involved in *La Tana* after a period of activism with Extinction Rebellion. Between a cigarette and a sip of Campari Spritz, we started talking about the utility of rescuing food and the impact it has on our lives and on the planet. S. told me:

> I think it's much more useful for us to have the idea that we're doing something concrete to counter what's behind this waste. [...] Rescuing is a concrete and emotional stopgap for us as an activist group that is facing something too big to deal with at this level. [...] It makes me feel good; it gives me the feeling that I'm doing something to counteract a system that doesn't work, so that's why I'm doing it in a very selfish way. (Informal dialogue, June 2022)

If S. sounds disillusioned, O. has a more cheerful attitude, with her short curly hair and colourful large pants: 'It makes me feel good to spend time at *La Tana*, to "take the vegetables by the hand", to do things... I like it, it gives me joy. Maybe I'm a little crazy?' (Interview, June 2022).

Recovering vegetables seems to be a tool that activists use to escape the dominant eco-imperialist norm, driven by the need to actually do something to oppose it. But this is not the end of the story. In O.'s words, by 'taking the vegetable by the hand' activists become part of a multispecies assemblage that makes them capable of taking concrete action. The encounter with vegetables responds to the collective need for 'doing something' to face the global and pervasive catastrophe of

climate change. In the end, what makes activists such is precisely the practice of recovering food. Discarded vegetables are perceived as a sort of local, manageable, sprawling materialisation of capitalist interspecies injustice. Almost wasted vegetables respond to the need to create an alcove of stable resistance to an emerging and intimately disruptive precariousness to which activists do not want to submit. In this way, vegetables make activists capable of taking action and, on a more personal level, of facing the precariousness of a world in which climate change and its manifestations (natural disasters, pandemics, wars for resources) can leave us disoriented.[4]

3.2. Vegetable's communication

On the other side of the relationship, what do activists make vegetables capable of?

One of the aspects of the multispecies turn is precisely the attempt to listen to other-than-human discourse. For example, Eduardo Kohn (2021) argues that human-to-other-than-human communication is possible if we consider non-symbolic signs as icons (such as a lizard's skin) or indices (such as tracks). Eva Haywood (2010), in her investigation of cup corals and those who study them, uses the term 'fingery-eye' to suggest a 'tentacular visuality' of impressionistic perception, suggesting a sort of tactile communication. Moreover, representationalism has been challenged by queer-feminist, postcolonial, and post-humanist critiques, which moved forward a focus on practices and action. This means that human discursive practice – as well as the more-than-human discourse – is not an independent signifying system originating from an autonomous subject. It emerges from a dynamic field of possibilities, in which matter and vitality are enmeshed. According to the feminist physicist Karen Barad,

> Discursive practices are not anthropomorphic placeholders for the projected agency of individual subjects, culture, or language. Indeed, they

4 I would like to clarify my intentions here. I'm aware of the risk of pathologizing resistance (Theodossopoulos 2014), and I don't want to claim that the motivation behind rescuing vegetables has to be climate anxiety. Rather than anxiety, I mostly found outrage and rage as motivating feelings to collectively create a political alternative. I do think, though, with the medical anthropology scholars, that there is a wide range of manifestations of psycho-physical suffering directly connected to climate change and climate injustice, even in the privileged Global North.

> are not human based practices. [...] In other words, materiality is discursive (i.e., material phenomena are inseparable from the apparatuses of bodily production: matter emerges out of and includes as part of its being the ongoing reconfiguring of boundaries), just as discursive practices are always already material (i.e., they are ongoing material (re)configurings of the world). (2003: 221–222)

In Portello neighbourhood, the material presence of rescued vegetables gives rise to an unexpected form of multispecies communication; their simple bodily presence during the *recupera* can be considered a material discourse. They are visible and recognizable as the materialisation of capitalism; they communicate as witnesses. Thus, vegetables will not speak intentionality, but provoke communication made possible by the activists' encounter. Vegetables are not mere products of the food industry chain but allies in founding relationships of solidarity and community. Recovered vegetables are not perceived exclusively as symbols of an environmentalist struggle but as other-than-human entities capable of creating new infrahuman connections, narrating a story of another possible future, 'telling' the truth about the consequences of industrial production and related climate change.

Even if a carrot may not look as agentic as a pigeon, or a cauliflower does not communicate in a way a parrot can, following Haraway, I look for stories that are 'speculative fabulations,' in which partners are 'enmeshed in partial and flawed translations across difference, redo ways of living and dying' (2016: 10). In the story I'm telling, activists and vegetables break expressive boundaries and make each other capable of communicating the possibility of another world. To think the relation between activists and vegetables as an alliance, and to theorise them as companion species, may be considered an unrealistic fabulation, an unlikely discourse that doesn't represent the factual truth. I embrace speculative fabulation as a method, precisely in order to avoid the representationalist assumption that grammatical categories reflect the underlying structure of the world (Barad 2003).

> I remember one day in particular of the period in which I was active at *La Tana*. It was strangely sunny for being winter in the foggy and drizzly city of Padua. After a very fruitful *recupera*, I was in a van full of vegetables with M., another activist friend. There was something strangely exciting in the promising atmosphere of that sunrise. We were talking about

some demonstration we organised, or maybe it was something about the organisation of the next Saturday night at the social centre. But there was something that kept on distracting us, somehow obliging to repeatedly interrupt our conversation. I was holding a particular vegetable on my legs. None of us had ever seen such a strange vegetable before. I can't even recollect exactly how it looked, it was something like a long rounded light green pumpkin, with some darker leaves. It was mesmerising. We were so amazed and proud of our little treasure. We couldn't stop wondering: What was its name, and where was it from, and what does the plant look like, why was there just one of it discarded and not an entire box? Once we arrived at *La Tana,* we showed it to the other people who were there to help with the distribution. The vegetable passed from hand to hand, under every person's scrutiny, but no one had ever seen anything similar. We settled the table outside and started serving the bunch of people that was already waiting for us. The usual old ladies were already standing there, looking for some free groceries and for someone willing to listen to their little everyday frustrations. There were also some migrant women, eventually holding the hand of their children. Somehow the strange vegetable started circulating also in between our stakeholders, who studied it closely, suggested a possible identity and doubtful passed it to the next person. Neither the elder local wisdom, nor the foreign intercontinental knowledge could identify this strange creature. The scene had an unfamiliar fairy tale taste, with all these people interacting with this nonhuman being and with one another, fantasising on how to cook it, exchanging possible recipes, commenting that it was a pity that it would have been thrown away. In this surreal pinkish morning light, people were listening to a vegetable story. Everyone hoped that the vegetable would have just spoken out and said its name out loud. Unfortunately, it didn't, but it communicated something nevertheless. It was whispering to the neighbour a novel on human solidarity and interspecies justice. With its material presence in that particular day and setting, it enabled people to connect and even to discuss overproduction consequences. In the end no one decided to bring it home to eat it. We left the improbable being there, on the window of *La Tana*, in order to let it contaminate more people with its plant novel. (Redrafting of memory, January 2024)

In *The Author of the Acacia Seeds*, quoted in the exergue, the pioneering science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin narrates about phytolinguists translating Ant texts, reading Penguin and Eggplant, deciphering the lyrics of the lichen, and geolinguists understanding the poetry of rocks (1982). Of course, it's just a novel. Still, as Le Guin writes elsewhere (1976), science fiction is not futurology. It describes real-

ity, the present world, it uses lies and metaphors to tell the truths of today. '[T]he truth is a matter of the imagination' (Le Guin 1976: 14). What I'm doing here is experimenting with imagination and materiality to explore nonhuman communication, to open doubts and peer into multispecies horizons, to unsettle hierarchies and to envisage alliances. I'm inspired by Tsing's capacity to smell, truck, follow and dance with Matsutake mushrooms. In her words:

> The time has come for new ways of telling true stories beyond civilizational first principles. Without Man and Nature, all creatures can come back to life, and men and women can express themselves without the strictures of a parochially imagined rationality. No longer relegated to whispers in the night, such stories might be simultaneously true and fabulous. How else can we account for the fact that anything is alive in the mess we have made? (2015: VII–VIII)

Nevertheless, in order to justify my interpretation, it's important to underline that my objective is not proving vegetables' vitality or a priori agency[5]. This would imply the ontological ordering of beings where anthropocentric thinking is rooted (Butler 2004). Instead, what I'm interested in is a specific net of undomesticated relations, a historically situated entanglement that connects humans with nonhuman vegetables.

4. Conclusions

In this chapter I've addressed the call for a collaboration between the field of multispecies research and the one of social movements' anthropology. I attempted to bring an ethnographic example of how holding these two branches of knowledge together, we could expand our human communication with potential nonhuman allies in our struggles. *La Tana* proves to be a laboratory for multispecies observation and collaboration. I interpreted the practice of recovering vegetables as a 'becoming with' relation, rendering activists and vegetables 'companion species.' I first relied on fieldwork data and interviews in

5 As I argued elsewhere, I think there is even too much space in the posthumanist agenda dedicated to proving nonhuman agency, with both the theoretical risk of falling back into anthropomorphization and the ethical danger of prioritising multispecies injustices at the expense of infrahuman inequalities (Terragni, Cesaroni 2023).

order to justify the thesis that vegetables make activists capable of living in a precarious world. Subsequently, I experimented with speculative fabulation in order to advance the idea of a vegetable form of communication. If this could be true in a small occupied social centre in Padua, how many 'comrade species' could we find, fighting together for building the foundations of that other possible world claimed in the squares? If the struggle against climate change is an imaginative challenge, maybe more-than-human resistance could be a good concept to start wondering with, in our search for a liveable planet.

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